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SUBJECT: USS BLUE RIDGE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS U.S.-PHILIPPINE PARTNERSHIP
IN MINDANAO

REF: MANILA 0379

¶1. SUMMARY: The USS Blue Ridge port call to General Santos City in Mindanao on February 17 and 18 highlighted the active partnership and long-standing USG investment in the Mindanao region and the General Santos City area, specifically. In addition to participating in community relations events with USS Blue Ridge personnel, the Ambassador, accompanied by U.S. Embassy team, officially inaugurated two USAID-constructed infrastructure projects, met with local government and business officials, visited U.S. businesses, and gave interviews to the media. End Summary.

POSITIVE IMPACT OF SUSTAINED U.S. INVOLVEMENT

¶2. General Santos City and vicinity are vibrant examples of the benefits of sustained U.S. Government involvement in terms of both investment and collaboration, and a model for other parts of Mindanao on the path to peace and prosperity. Two decades of infrastructure projects led by USG efforts have propelled this into one of the fastest growing cities in the Philippines. The improvement in the quality of life in the region has created an atmosphere of optimism that is increasing stability and economic gains. The corporate responsibility of U.S. firms toward the community and their employees help to multiply these efforts to improve the region. The positive impacts of these efforts include a continued strengthening of U.S. relations with the people, the businesses, and the governmental units.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS PARTNERSHIPS

¶3. During the February 17-18 visit of the USS Blue Ridge, the first U.S. Navy ship to pay a port call to General Santos City in decades, the crew led strong Community Relations (COMREL) activities that were truly joint USG actions partnering with Philippine entities. At three separate locations, personnel from the USS Blue Ridge joined with members of local community groups, local governments, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines in the renovation of two buildings at one school and the complete construction of a school building at a second school. At each location, the Ambassador and Seventh Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Crowder presented educational and recreational equipment. A Medical Civil Action Program (MEDCAP) by Blue Ridge personnel along with USAID and JSOTF-P personnel provided free treatment to over 600 patients.

BONDING WITH A WIDE RANGE OF THE MINDANAO PEOPLE

¶4. The Ambassador and VADM Crowder co-hosted a reception aboard the USS Blue Ridge on the evening of February 17 attended by a wide range of citizens from the Mindanao region, including government and military officials, students, teachers, business leaders, U.S. residents of the area, police, and military personnel. A number of

those in attendance had driven several hours over bad roads to attend the reception. The Governor of Sulu came all the way from Jolo to press his appeal for a similar ship visit to his province. Media coverage was extremely positive.

LUNCHEON WITH LOCAL OFFICIALS AND BUSINESS LEADERS

15. The Governor of Sarangani province hosted the Ambassador and VADM Crowder at a luncheon at which business leaders and local government leaders praised the community outreach projects of the U.S. Three provincial Governors, several Mayors, as well as the presidential advisor on the peace process emphasized and directly tied the continued involvement of the U.S. in the social and economic improvement in this area to stability throughout Mindanao.

USAID BOAT LANDING PROJECT MAKING A DIFFERENCE

16. The Ambassador inaugurated two of the 815 community-level infrastructural projects funded by USAID in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao: a footbridge at a high school in General Santos City and a USAID boat landing project in Sapu Masla, Sarangani, which includes a sizable number of former Muslim insurgents. The latter project will directly benefit the 7,000 residents by providing a safe, secure docking facility for the efficient offloading of cargo. The ceremony and project received widespread coverage in the local and national media.

VISIT TO GENERAL SANTOS CITY FISH PORT

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17. The Ambassador visited the General Santos City Fish Port complex and received a very informative briefing from the leaders of the Federation of Fishing and Allied Industries regarding the vibrant tuna industry. The Philippine tuna industry ranks second in world tuna landings and fifth in canned tuna production. Ninety percent of the Philippine tuna industry is located in Southern Mindanao, providing direct revenues of \$400 million and 100,000 jobs. The General Santos City tuna industry improved from a substandard rating to full accreditation by the EU from 2004 to 2006, thanks in part to USAID/GEM assistance. A major issue for the tuna industry is the access to U.S. markets, the current destination of 44% of canned exports. The Ambassador encouraged the Philippine tuna industry to work with the Philippine government toward a Free Trade Agreement proposal with the U.S., instead of hoping for preferential access to the U.S. market.

VISIT TO CARGILL COPRA PROCESSING PLANT

18. Accompanied by the Embassy's Foreign Agricultural Counselor the Ambassador toured the Copra Crushing Plant of Cargill Philippines, Inc. in General Santos City. The plant is one of 10 facilities owned by Cargill Philippines and serves as a model for its safe and healthy work environment for its employees. The plant produces crude coconut oil and copra expeller pellets, both of which are Philippines' top agricultural export items to the U.S.

INTERVIEW WITH PRINT AND TELEVISION MEDIA

19. The Ambassador gave an exclusive interview to ABS-CBN TV in addition to several on-the spot interviews during the COMREL events and the reception aboard the USS Blue Ridge. There was excellent coverage of all events in the local media. The Ambassador highlighted in particular our partnership and close cooperation to bring peace and prosperity to Mindanao.

KENNEY